Understanding Maneuver as The Basis for a Doctrine

(Marine Corps Gazette – August 1990)

Captain John F. Schmitt

Maneuver warfare is the official doctrine of the Marine Corps, but not everyone has a complete understanding of the concept. This article takes it apart, studies its component parts, and dispels some of the misconceptions occasionally associated with it. Studying maneuver warfare will give you a clearer insight into how the Corps intends to fight its next war

The Marine Corps now has an official doctrine called maneuver warfare-an entire way of war based on this single concept called Maneuver. Such a commitment implies a couple of things. First, it implies that this concept had better be awfully powerful and with wide utility-which I think it is and has. Second, it implies that we had better understand this concept very well. That is our purpose here.

This at first might appear a gratuitous, academic endeavor. After all, the concept of Maneuver seems pretty straightforward, does it not? Almost axiomatic, in fact, Maneuver has enjoyed status as one of the principles of war for decades, and it is defined explicitly in *Joint Publications 1-02, Department of defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.*

But experience, mine at least, shows that as a group we do not understand Maneuver as well as we ought to. Misunderstandings range from fundamental-such as equating Maneuver to simple movement-to a less than full appreciation for the practical applications of the concept. With that in mind, the intent here is to develop a broader, deeper understanding of the concept of Maneuver as the foundation of a doctrine. Within that intent we will also try to clear up many of the common misconceptions about Maneuver.

Point of Departure: Advantage

As defined by *Joint Publication 1-02,* Maneuver is the:

> employment of force, on the battlefield through movement in combination with fire, or fire potential, to achieve a

position of advantage with respect to the enemy to accomplish the mission.

This is the classical definition of Maneuver, and it is fine as far as it goes. But it is a narrow definition, one that limits application, as we will see.

As noted in the joint definition, the conceptual starting point for Maneuver is the desire to gain and exploit advantage as the basis for defeating an adversary. Thus the principle behind Maneuver is simple enough and should not appear intellectually intimidating to anyone. It is in practice that it becomes more difficult-which explains the difference between the great commanders and everyone else.

Maneuver stems from the wish to attain a desired objective as effectively and economically as possible. By the effective and economical use of effort, Maneuver implies the ability to succeed beyond the amount of energy expended. To borrow from science, Maneuver is a form of *leverage,* which allows us to lift a heavy object that we could otherwise not lift, allows us to get more output for the amount of energy expended-like a lever or a block and tackle that increases mechanical advantage.

This point of departure is manifest in the inclination to bypass the obstacle rather than plow though it, the willingness to follow the course of least resistance, the instinct to duck the punch rather than absorb it, the desire to build a better mousetrap. Carried to the perfect extreme Maneuver offers the alluring promise of defeating an enemy without actually having to close with him; the advantage gained is so decisive the enemy realizes the futility of resisting. "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill." Sun Tzu said. “To subdue the enemy without fighting, is the acme of skill." A classic example of this is Napoleon at Ulm in 1805, where his turning movement so mentally overwhelmed Mack that the Austrian surrendered his army of 30,000 without a fight. Such cases are exceptional (which led Clausewitz to reject them as unworthy of consideration), but B.H. Liddell Hart concluded that "their rarity enhances rather than detracts from their value-as an indication of latent potentialities....”

Maneuver need not gain a bloodless victory: its aim is to create leverage that makes victory easier to come by. Clearly, the greater the advantage, the better. Writing about strategy, Liddell Hart said that the "true aim is not so much to bring about battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this." It "has for its purpose the reduction of fighting to the slenderest possible proportions." Therefore, Maneuver

normally consists of two parts: *creating* the advantage and *exploiting* it, or finishing the deed.

Limitations

The joint definition is limited in several ways. First, it refers only to the "employment of forces on the battlefield." But Winston Churchill observed that:

> there are many kinds of maneuver in war, only some of which take place on the battlefield. There are maneuvers to the flank or rear. There are maneuvers in time, in diplomacy, in mechanics, in psychology: all of which are removed from the battlefield, but react often decisively upon it, and the object of all is to find easier ways, other than sheer slaughter, of achieving the main purpose.

There are ways of gaining leverage other than the physical employment of forces, and our understanding should appreciate this.

Second, with its reference to battle and the employment of units through fire and movement, the definition clearly focuses on the tactical level. But, as Churchill implies, the idea of advantage applies at any level of conflict. While at the tactical levels the means of Maneuver may tend to be the physical components of combat power, this is not exclusively so. At higher levels, Maneuver will tend to incorporate a greater range of mental and moral components. The point is that our definition of Maneuver should not apply only at the tactical level but at the operational and strategic levels as well.

Third, the joint definition is one-dimensional: it considers Maneuver only in a spatial dimension, describing the aim of Maneuver as gaining a *positional* advantage. We limit ourselves unnecessarily by looking only for positional advantage. We ought to look for any advantage that will help us accomplish the mission effectively and economically. As Churchill mentioned, there are plenty of dimensions other than spatial in which we can gain an advantage. There is temporal advantage, for example, gained by establishing a higher tempo than the enemy can keep us with. There is psychological advantage: the boxer who tries to "psyche out" his opponent during the typical prefight hype is maneuvering for a psychological edge before the bell even rings. There are technological, diplomatic, economic, mental, and moral advantages, among others.

The definition describes movement in combination with fire as the vehicle for gaining positional advantage. Just as we limit ourselves by accepting only positional advantage, we

limit ourselves by accepting movement as the only means of advantage. There are valid means we ought to consider for gaining leverage other than movement. What is movement but a *change* in position? The basic ingredient of Maneuver, then, is not movement but change. We gain leverage by introducing some change, or perception of change, that improves our situation relative to the enemy. And it follows that the greater the change (real or perceived-as long as it favors us), the greater the advantage.

Enemy Orientation

One good aspect of the joint definition is the idea that Maneuver makes sense only "in respect to the enemy." Advantage is by definition a relative thing. Gaining an advantage for ourselves may equally mean putting the enemy at a disadvantage. Liddell Hart wrote that the most effective approach "is one that lures or startles the opponent into a false move-so that as in jujitsu, his own effort is turned into the lever of his overthrow." Movement, or any action not focused on the enemy, is not Maneuver; it is simply wasted energy. Therefore, an outward or enemy orientation is integral to Maneuver. This means far more than simply aiming at enemy forces rather than terrain objectives. It means *understanding* the enemy-his doctrine, tactics, and techniques, his organization, his aims, and his motives. As Sun Tzu said: "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril."

Creating Advantage

If the basic aim of Maneuver is to maximize advantage, how do we do that?

Exploiting Vulnerability

First we avoid enemy strength and exploit enemy vulnerability. This is not a new idea. Sun Tzu wrote:

> Now an enemy may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so any army avoids strength and strikes weakness. And as, water shapes its flow in accordance with the ground, so an army manages its victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy.

In World War I there were "soft-spot" and von Hutier tactics. Later came Liddell Hart's theories of the "expanding torrent" and the "indirect approach." Today, we talk of "surfaces and gaps" (from the German "*Flaechen und Luekentaktik").* Classically we think of attacking the enemy in the flanks and rear rather than the front. But in an era of fluid warfare, front, flanks, and rear are relative things rather than

permanent aspects; if we are walking down a dark alley and an assailant jumps out at us from a side doorway, we instinctively turn to face him. So it is with military units, although normally the larger the unit, the longer it takes to turn. Thus, it may become necessary to "fix" our enemy's attention before we can get at his flank.

Rather than describing these terms as permanent physical directions, we might better describe them as a function of attention. The "front" is that area in which the enemy's attention is focused, whether it be physically before him or not. The "flanks" are on the periphery of his attention and the "rear" where he is least attentive. For that matter, these "areas" may not be areas at all in the spatial sense. The enemy's "rear," for example, may be any possibility for which he is unprepared.

Identifying Critical Factors

Second, we realize that some factors of the enemy's makeup are more critical to him than others. Some, if attacked, he can function without, while others will cause him grievous harm. We should target those factors-be they locations, capabilities, functions, or moral characteristics-that are most critical, the ones from which we will gain the greatest benefit by attacking. This also is not a new idea. With the revival of Clausewitz, the term "center of gravity" is the most popular but also the most prone to misunderstanding. Jomini termed the same basic concept "decisive points" (although his discussion focused more on actual geographical points). Sun Tzu captured it very succinctly: "Seize something he cherishes, and he will conform to your desires." The basic idea is the same. Attack the thing that will hurt the enemy most. "Attacking" in this sense need not necessarily be destructive. It may actually be a constructive act, such as the Marine Corps' Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam. The mission was to rid rural areas of Viet Cong control. Rather than trying futilely to track down a fleeter, flitting enemy, the plan was to make the guerrilla's "position" untenable by attacking the popular support base that was critical to his survival. "Attacking" that base meant using combined action platoons to protect the villages.

A wise enemy will protect those things that are critical to him. Thus identifying our objective becomes a two-part process that must strike a balance between what is critical to him and what is vulnerable to us.

Focus

Maneuver requires not only that we go after such critical vulnerabilities, but also that we focus our own efforts against them. We should point out that focus does not necessarily equate to physical concentration (although this is the classical application of the concept). Focus is the convergence of effort in some way-in space, in time, in intent-so as to create a unified effect. It is possible to be physically dispersed and yet remain focused on a common objective. Consider the German blitzes into Poland and France in 1939 and 1940, both of which comprised multiple broadly dispersed axes, but all of which were unified by a common focus-shattering the depth and cohesion of the enemy defenses. In fact, as we will see later, multiplicity and variability, when properly focused, can be significant contributors to successful Maneuver.

The willingness to gang up (at least in purpose if not in mass) on critical enemy vulnerabilities demands a certain streak of ruthlessness and opportunism. It also demands the willingness to accept risk. Focusing in one way necessitates strict economy in others. In his study of the decisive battles and campaigns of history, John Boyd identified a common condition of success which he called "unequal distribution." Therefore, if we will Maneuver, it seems we must overcome the natural inclination to "fair share"; that is, to spread ourselves evenly (in efforts and attention as well as resources).

Selectivity

The ability to identify those critical factors implies selectivity, which derives from judgment and intelligence (in both the G-2 sense and the generic sense). Maneuver thus means being more intelligent than the enemy-outfoxing him, outsmarting him, outthinking him. What is the characteristic that distinguishes the Great Captains of military history? It is not that they had larger armies, because they often bested superior foes. It is not necessarily that their armies were better equipped or trained. It is because, understanding their enemy and their own capabilities, they made war more wisely. Clearly, Maneuver means "fighting smart" as *FMFM 1* says, relying on the intelligent use of force rather than brute strength to gain the objective economically.

Creating Disadvantage

As we have seen, improving our situation relative to the enemy may be a matter of degrading his situation relative to

us. We do this by limiting his ability-physical, mental, and moral-to effectively counter the things we do. We seek to surprise him or distract him so that, at least temporarily, he is not working at full effectiveness.

Surprise

Surprise is a condition of disorientation that occurs as the result of some unexpected event. In its most extreme cases surprise may take the form of shock or paralysis. But in any form, the result is a temporary loss, if only partial, of effectiveness. Why is an enemy surprised? There are three basic reasons: he can be *deceived* as to what is happening, he can be *confused* as to what is happening, or he can simply be I i*gnorant* of what is happening. It is important to remember that
surprise is not something we *do,* but something that *happens* to the enemy as the result of some event. We can certainly take actions intended to surprise him, but success depends in the end on his susceptibility to being surprised.

The first way we can try to surprise the enemy is by deception, by which we try to delude him into believing we are doing something we are not. We try to give the enemy a clear picture of the situation, but the wrong picture. He has a choice, but we convince him to choose wrong. For example, through an elaborate deception plan in 1944, the Allies succeeded in deceiving the Germans into believing the cross-channel invasion of France would take place at Calais. So complete was the deception that a full three weeks after the Normandy landings the Germans still refused to redeploy their operational reserve, the 15th Army, out of Calais. convinced the
Normandy invasion was but a subsidiary landing.

The second way, and one we do not appreciate as well, is through ambiguity, by which we seek to confuse the enemy so he does not know what to believe. He is faced with a choice but cannot choose. Ambiguity depends on multiplicity and variability, the ability to act in such a way that offers us numerous options so that the enemy cannot focus against us. Sun Tzu said:

> The enemy does not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few.

Another way we create ambiguity is to be without any discernible form or pattern, to appear irregular and amorphous

while maintaining an effective organization, to appear purposeless while having a focused purpose. Sun Tzu again:

> Subtle and insubstantial, the expert leaves no trace: divinely mysterious, he is in audible. Thus he is master of his enemy's fate...
>
> The ultimate in disposing one's troops is to be without ascertainable shape. Then the most penetrating spies cannot pry in nor can the wise lay plans against you.

The resulting ambiguity enabled surprise.

The third way we seek to surprise the enemy is to act in such a way that the enemy has never even considered, to do something completely outside the realm of the conceivable. Whereas in the first two methods the enemy is faced with choices, in the third he does not even realize there is a choice to be made. More than the others, surprise by this method relies on speed and security and on an ingenious flair for the truly creative and unexpected. We can turn once more to Sun Tzu who said, "Speed is the essence of war. Take advantage of the enemy's unpreparedness, travel by unexpected routes and strike him where he has taken no precautions."

An example is MacArthur's masterful stroke at Inchon in 1950, which came as completely unexpected to the overextended North Koreans and resulted in the total collapse of the North Korean army. The scheme was outlandish even to MacArthur's seniors and staff, who were opposed from the start; it became a reality only as the result of MacArthur's personal persistence.

Of the three forms, deception would seem to offer the greater payoff because it actually deludes the enemy into misplaying his hand rather than simply leaving him guessing. But deception is usually also more difficult to pull off because it requires us to actually convince the enemy of a lie as opposed to simply trying to hide the truth. Deception will have a greater effect and a greater chance of success if the delusion we try to sell reinforces what the enemy is already predisposed to believe. Finally, deception is usually more vulnerable to compromise than the other forms.

Distraction

The second way we can degrade our enemy's ability to counter us is to distract him, meaning we try to occupy his attention in one way to create an advantage in another. Certainly, a distraction may have as part of its purpose to deceive the enemy, but even if we cannot surprise him we can still create for him a dilemma designed to force him to divide his attention and his efforts. Thus, Maneuver would seem in

many cases to consist of two distinct but complementary parts, the intent of the first being to set the stage for the second-creating the advantage then exploiting it. Sun Tzu describes this as the *cheng and ch'i:* the *cheng* being the normal or direct, the fixing force; and the *ch'i* being the extraordinary or indirect, the decisive force.

> Generally, in battle use the normal force to engage; use the extraordinary to win....
>
> In battle there are only the normal and extraordinary forces, but their combinations are limitless; none can comprehend them all.

As BGen Samuel B. Griffith notes in his translation of Sun Tzu: "Should the enemy perceive and respond to a *ch'i* manoeuvre in such a manner as to neutralize it, the manoeuvre would automatically become *cheng."* The *cheng* and *ch'i* will be most effective if they put the enemy on the horns of a dilemma, so that to react to one the enemy makes himself more vulnerable to the other.

The notion of distraction explains why in our very first tactics lessons we were taught that an envelopment (which, we learned, was the superior form of maneuver) requires a base of fire while a frontal attack does not.

Thus, the suppressive effect of fire (or even, as the joint definition indicates, the potential for fire), in that it prevents the enemy from effectively countering our actions, is a component of Maneuver. For that matter, the destructive effects of fire, if used to put the enemy at a specific disadvantage (such as to create a gap or knock out a machinegun position that is the backbone of an enemy defense) rather than simply to cause cumulative attrition, can be a component of Maneuver as well. The same applies for communications jamming, for example, which disrupts the enemy's command in order to create leverage at a key moment although continuous barrage jamming that seeks to degrade the enemy s general ability to communicate irrespective of some other, decisive action does not qualify.

We should point out that distraction does not require the physical application of force, such as a fixing attack or a base of fire, but can be any element that occupies the enemy's attention.

Variety and Cunning

Our ability to take an enemy unprepared-to put him at a disadvantage by surprise or distraction-rests in part on our ability to remain unpredictable; that is, not to conform to the enemy's expectations. The first time we strike the enemy's left flank it will probably constitute Maneuver. When we

repeat the action, it may or may not be Maneuver. The third time we try, it probably will not be Maneuver; it will probably be exactly what the enemy expects. Thus, variety, as a condition of unpredictability, is an integral component of Maneuver over time. By the same argument, novelty, originality, and creativity are components as well.

If we couple this bent for the original with the ruthlessness described earlier, we see the emergence of cunning and craft, a talent for artifice and wile. We get what Churchill described as "an element of legerdemain, an original and sinister touch, which leaves the enemy puzzled as well as beaten."

Speed

The final key component of Maneuver is speed. To create advantage and exploit potential advantage, we must be able to act faster than the enemy can react. Because we now appreciate Maneuver not only in the spatial dimension, we should not think of speed only in terms of the ability to move fast, but also in terms of tempo-the ability to think, decide, act and react quickly. And because Maneuver only has meaning relative to the enemy, it is not absolute speed that matters, but relative speed. As John Boyd says, we can be slow as long as the enemy is slower. We can gain an advantage by improving our own speed or by decreasing our enemy's.

Speed is a contributor in that it allows us to concentrate superior force against selected enemy weakness and that it allows us to take the enemy by unexpected action. But speed is also a lever in its own right in that through superior speed we can seize and maintain the initiative, allowing us to dictate the terms of conflict and shape events to our advantage. Furthermore, if change is the basic vehicle of Maneuver, speed increases the impact of change and heightens the enemy's resulting disorientation. In other words, the faster we change the situation, the greater the consequent advantage. And since war is a fluid phenomenon, if we change the situation quickly and continuously over time, our advantage compounds with each change.

What Maneuver Is Not

We have taken the concept of Maneuver apart, and hopefully we have discovered there is far more here than immediately meets the eye. But we are not finished. We still need to eliminate the commonly held misconceptions about Maneuver. We have analyzed what Maneuver is, we also need to clarify what Maneuver is not.

Movement

It should be clear by now that simple movement does not equate to Maneuver. By definition, Maneuver must be oriented on the enemy; simple movement does not qualify. Furthermore, Maneuver is not necessarily simply relational movement. This may be one manifestation of Maneuver, but hardly the only one. We have seen that Maneuver exists in many dimensions, not just spatial, and that the essential means of a Maneuver is change in whatever form rather than movement.

Dependent on Mechanization

Nowhere in our discussion to this point have we identified the need for mechanization or motorization. This misconception has arisen because we often equate Maneuver with rapid movement-as we have seen, a misconception in itself-and we equate rapid movement with mechanization. In many environments, if used properly, foot-mobile forces can generate greater mobility than mechanized forces. And it is not absolute speed that matters anyway, but relative speed. Even if we are slow, so long as the enemy is slower, we maintain the advantage.

Simply Flanking Attacks or Envelopments

We associate flanking attacks and envelopments with Maneuver because we associate the enemy's flanks and rear with vulnerability. And, in fact, these actions will often constitute Maneuver in the classic sense. But to establish a universal tactic, such as the envelopment, is to contradict the variety that is integral to Maneuver. Used exclusively, the envelopment ceases to be a tactic at all and becomes a rote procedure performed mechanically and not oriented on the enemy. The Israelis learned this in Lebanon in 1982 when they discovered they had better success attacking frontally because their enemy had become conditioned to expect flanking movements.

Bloodless

War is about fighting. War is by nature a bloody business. Many of the critics of Maneuver mistakenly believe that Maneuver advocates units running amok" (as an article in the *Gazette* recently put it), running circles around, bypassing, enveloping the enemy, and in the words of one general officer: “Trying to confuse him to death," but never actually fighting him. With all due respect to Sun Tzu, only in exceptional cases does Maneuver eliminate the need for fighting. Rather, Maneuver seeks to arrange the situation so that when we do fight it as at an advantage. As Sun Tzu

further said: "Therefore a skilled commander seeks victory from the situation and does not demand it of his subordinates." Maneuver does not mean that we do not fight: it means that we fight selectively.

Divorced From Firepower

Similarly, Maneuver does not imply that firepower is unimportant. It does not even imply that firepower is only of secondary importance. And nothing in our discussion has implied that killing the enemy contradicts the concept of Maneuver. The JCS definition clearly states that firepower is a key component of Maneuver (at least in the tactical sense). At the tactical level at least, skillful Maneuver uses firepower to create or exploit advantage, not simply to grind the enemy down cumulatively.

Inapplicable in Low-Intensity Conflict

A recent *Gazette* article, "'A Marine for All Seasons? Maneuver Warfare versus Low-Intensity Conflict," (MCG, Sep89) argues that:

> the basic tenets of maneuver warfare (combined arms teams running amok-sorry, amidst-a fluid, violent battlefield) have no place in most forms of low-intensity conflict.

The author suffers from the common malady of understanding Maneuver only in the spatial dimension. Against an irregular. unconventional enemy with no discernible front, flanks, or rear (in the spatial sense), who refuses to stand and fight a conventional battle, naturally such conventional interpretations will fail. But by now I hope we are beginning to see Maneuver in broader terms than these. The components of Maneuver as we have identified them-creating and exploiting advantage in any form; opportunism, superior speed or tempo, focusing ruthlessly on critical enemy factors; surprise in the form of deception, ambiguity or unpredictability; distraction; variety; creativity; and enemy orientation-would seem to apply quite obviously to any kind of war. Indeed, these Maneuver components would seem to apply to any kind of competitive endeavor.

The guerrilla, with his hit-and-run tactics, his inherent ambiguity resulting from irregular and amorphous organizations, and his unwillingness to stand and fight unless at a distinct local advantage, demonstrates a keen appreciation for Maneuver in its unconventional forms. The ambush, a staple tactic in most types of low-intensity conflict, is a perfect example of Maneuver at its purest and most basic best: letting an unknowing enemy put himself at an overwhelming disadvantage and

making him pay dearly for it. The CAP cited earlier is an excellent example of operational-level Maneuver applied to low-intensity war.

Synthesis: What Maneuver Is

We have taken Maneuver apart to try to glean its various components, some of which are integral and some of which are merely contributors or multipliers of advantage. We have tried to dispel the various misconceptions about Maneuver as well. What are we left with?

Maneuver derives from a very simple concept: creating and exploiting advantage as a means for defeating an opponent quickly, effectively, and economically. Although simple in concept, in application Maneuver comprises a nearly countless variety of forms and methods, limited only by the imagination and the parameters of the given conflict. There is far more to Maneuver than a rapid movement around an enemy's flank. As the basis for a doctrine, Maneuver is not captured in a single act nor even in a consistent way of acting. Rather, it is manifest in a certain state of mind, a mental approach to conflict. It is at its source an approach based on intelligence and all this implies: being selective, being focused, being clever, being creative, being crafty. It is an approach that ruthlessly exploits advantage. It is an approach that recognizes the inherent value of speed.

Thus, if we had to offer a revised definition for *Joint Pub 1-02,* it might read something like this: "**Maneuver**-A mental approach to conflict born of opportunism, variety, and cunning, by which we create and exploit advantage as a means for success by creating a rapidly and continuously changing situation in which our enemy cannot effectively cope. We do this by focusing strength against critical enemy vulnerability, generating superior speed, and distracting or disorienting our foe through ambiguity or deception."